



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 4 (2002)

S. L. Mizruchi (ed.). *Religion and Cultural Studies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. 269. \$19.95 (Paper).

[1] Stubbornly resisting nearly 300 years of predictions of its imminent demise by many Western intellectuals, religion remains a vibrant force in the lives of most Americans and critical to any accurate understanding of the cultural landscape. Yet, in higher education, many of the discussions dealing with religion remain impoverished and at times sophomoric. *Religion and Cultural Studies* attempts to address this deficiency by serving up a smorgasbord of interdisciplinary academic insights on religious symbolism, belief and practice, especially in relation to the process of cultural "meaning making." The book contains 11 essays from an impressive array of scholars representing the fields of anthropology, literary criticism, history, religion, American studies, and journalism. A stated goal of the book is to challenge intellectuals to deal seriously with spirituality and ethics, and take a new scholarly interest in religion and cultural issues.

[2] This collection provides a mixture of reflections. Some articles provide qualitative-oriented analyses of religious practice, such as the complicated process of conversion to Christianity in a small New Guinea community in a rain-forest, the intersection of modern Voodoo religion with contemporary issues like race and gender, or the popularity of Asian and Pagan religions in cyberspace. Other authors point their disciplines toward fundamental human issues and dynamics that have been addressed historically by religious traditions.

[3] Some of the essays tend toward the wordy side, and others contain a patch quilt of research that seems to hang together tenuously. But there are valuable offerings for anyone seeking a broad introduction to the ways in which the humanities and social sciences can look at things religious. It also catches some of the intellectual chaos of the modern academy as it struggles with spiritual and ethical questions.

[4] In "Human Solidarity and the Problem of Otherness," Giles Gunn's reflects on the quest for a grand narrative to promote human solidarity to replace the Judeo-Christian narrative that once united American culture. This quest occurs amidst a deepening awareness among some anthropologists that there is no longer sufficient evidence of a universal human nature or collective ethical center to which a grand narrative might appeal. Gunn suggests

moving "beyond" the struggle for solidarity to realize the best the human race can achieve is a type of "fundamental kinship with the enemy." He identifies prototypes for conceptualizing such "kinship," ending with a useful distinction: the key to bridging the distance between the self and the other may come through seeking the conceptualization of a common world, rather than a common human nature.

[5] Most of the essays in *Religion and Cultural Studies* weave their insights and arguments from interdisciplinary sources. In general, organized religion is not a topic of direct exploration, nor is it the subject of praise or condemnation. A notable exception is an article by ex-Jesuit Jack Miles, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *God: A Biography*. Miles suggests religion will play an indispensable role in the world's response (or lack of response) to the warning of scientists that the Earth is on a pathway to ecological destruction. Valiant discussions of character education notwithstanding, Miles suffers no doubts that enlightened self-interest will never inspire most humans to make the kinds of self-sacrifice required for the world to avoid the annihilation of the ecosystem. Making note of the erroneous predictions by many intellectuals in the earlier parts of the twentieth century that art would become a secular substitute for religion, the essayist believes art is a key to helping religions re-imagine how they might readapt their old resources to meet the world's new realities. Miles doubts religions are up to the task, but wants to hope they are.

[6] In a tightly written historical essay, Richard Fox tracks the American "culture of love" between the 1830's and 1950's, highlighting the swinging pendulum between freedom and individualism on one pole, and social responsibility and community on the other. Both religious and secular perspectives have evolved on both ends of the continuum. Fox summarizes a panorama of thinkers who have struggled to articulate a cultural "love-talk" in the United States, beginning with the Puritan frame of reference and its double-bind message that God's love is free, but only at a cost. The Unitarians, Universalists, and Methodists broke this original frame, and set the pendulum in motion between the poles. Fox's article offers a good deal of reflective material on secular and religious attempts to enhance or impede the romantic impulse, with the ever-present debate in the background: how much must love be "bounded" to promote individual and communitarian health? The essay places some of the dripping sentimentalism of contemporary popular culture against a broader awareness of the diversity of thought on the nature and purpose of that most religious sentiment, love.

[7] It is reflective of the growing interdisciplinary nature of higher education, and the increased influence of fiction in modern culture, that several authors use their essays to place fictional works under the scrutiny of a contemporary hermeneutic. The editor, Susan Mizruchi offers an engaging exploration of the role of religion in contemporary society by identifying the morphing of ritual from religious to more secular contexts. The writer notes the not-so-subtle use of religious language and symbol for a Wheat Chex box advertisement, promising to unite the community through food. As Mizruchi points out, in ancient times, this promise came through the body of a god, most notably through the Eucharist in the Christian tradition.

[8] In trying to challenge intellectuals to take religion, spiritual, and ethical issues more seriously, *Religion and Cultural Studies* may bite off more than any one book can chew. But,

graduate school courses dealing with the contextualization of religion, or religion and culture might find several worthy articles to add variety to a reading list. The collection of essays provides a buffet selection of the possibilities for returning these fundamental issues back into the mainstream of the intellectual enterprise. Bon Appetite.

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